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Generating Response To Literature With At-Risk Third Grade Students

Kathy Everts Danielson
Patty Tighe

Response to literature is an important aspect of reading and comprehension (Hansen, 1987). As readers read quality literature they are more apt to respond in a personal nature to the text. Rosenblatt's (1983) response theory suggests that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. It provides for the unique response to literature that an individual might have, depending upon the text and the context of reading. This individual response is important:

Researchers in literary response have tended to conceptualize each reader as a 'universe of one,' thus challenging the notion of the normative response to literary texts (Beach and Hynds, 1991, p. 453).

Literature discussion groups enable students to comprehend at many different levels (Eeds and Wells, 1989). Discussion that focuses on a shared reading experience allows children to hear varying views of the piece that all have read.

The use of literature for reading instruction has been advocated by many (Cullinan, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Harste, 1989). Eldredge and Butterfield (1986) compared a traditional basal approach to a literature-based approach with second

graders and found significant differences in children's scores on standardized tests, favoring students who were taught with literature. The Ohio Reading Recovery Program, as described by Boehnlein (1987), regularly included literature in its work with at risk first graders and found significant gains among these children's reading successes as measured by Marie Clay's Diagnostic Survey (Clay, 1990).

These studies did not assess students' attitudes regarding reading, nor the varying levels of response to literature of at risk students described in this article. At risk children are defined as students lacking self-esteem and the motivation to learn. The former United States Secretary of Education describes at risk youth as those who:

live on islands of cultural and economic isolation far from the world of school, books, and learning. They cannot leap in a single bound from one world to another. They need bridges to help them span that gap, strong bridges built from innovative plans, with whatever tools can be found, by any and all who will help (Cavazos, 1989, p. 7).

It is imperative that these children have successful reading experiences so that they are motivated to stay in school. Quality literature and the diverse possibilities of response can provide these positive reading experiences.

Project explanation

A third grade class of 18 at risk students was divided into two literature discussion groups. These discussion groups met and talked about the children's books they were reading twice a week from January 1991 through May 1991. The authors of this article served as facilitators of the two groups.

These students are considered at risk because they live in an inner city neighborhood and do not have the literacy support from their families that many other children do. All students had copies of the book that their group was reading. The literature discussions were often begun by the quick rereading of the book and then the spontaneous comments of the students and the teacher. These discussion sessions were tape recorded and responses examined to determine if any emerging themes of responses occurred. Before meeting in discussion groups, students also wrote comments about the books they read in literature logs. They were to answer one of the prompts that encourage response (Kelly, 1990; Bleich, 1978). These responses were recorded in an entry in their literature logs and were written for every book. The prompts were: 1) What did you notice about this book? 2) How did this book make you feel? 3) How did this book relate to your own experience?

McKenna and Kear's (1990) reading attitude test was given as a pre-test (at the beginning of the semester) and post-test (at the end of the semester) to determine if students' attitudes toward reading changed during the course of the semester while students were reading and discussing the trade books. Table 1 shows that in general students' attitudes regarding reading improved. A *t*-test was done comparing the pre-test scores with the post-test scores. Post-test scores were significantly higher for items 10, 11, and 14. Students were more interested in reading a variety of different books after being exposed to them. In addition, students were less hesitant to answer questions about books, and felt very positive about reading in general. Their overall attitudes regarding reading were enhanced by the use of quality literature.

Table 1
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
(McKenna and Kear, 1990)

(n = 18)

Range: 1.00 (*very unhappy*) TO 4.00 (*very happy*)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Post-test</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
1 How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?	2.78	3.05
2 How do you feel when you read a book in school during free time?	2.67	2.67
3 How do you feel about reading for fun at home?	2.67	3.28
4 How do you feel about getting a book for a present?	2.56	2.83
5 How do you feel about spending free time reading?	2.94	2.67
6 How do you feel about starting a new book?	2.83	3.17
7 How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?	2.50	2.61
8 How do you feel about reading instead of playing?	1.94	1.78
9 How do you feel about going to a bookstore?	3.22	3.22
10 How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?	2.67	3.44*
11 How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?	2.00	2.78*
12 How do you feel about doing reading workbook pages and worksheets?	2.33	2.50
13 How do you feel about reading in school?	2.94	3.22
14 How do you feel about reading your school books?	2.44	3.11*
15 How do you feel about learning from a book?	3.06	3.50
16 How do you feel when it's time for reading class?	2.61	2.61
17 How do you feel about the stories you read in reading class?	2.94	3.11
18 How do you feel when you read out loud in class?	2.67	3.06
19 How do you feel about using a dictionary?	2.39	2.17
20 How do you feel about taking a reading test?	2.95	2.50

* p < .05

Table 2 indicates the results of a comparison of the total means of the pre-test and the post-test between males and females using a *t*-test. The boys' pretest scores were significantly lower than the girls' pre-test scores. Thus the boys started out with a less positive view of reading than did the girls. The boys' post-test scores were significantly higher than the boys'

pre-test scores. Their attitudes about reading were significantly improved, according to this attitude assessment. The girls' post-test scores were higher than their pre-test scores, but not to a significant level.

Table 2
Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
(McKenna and Kear, 1990)
Total Means by Sex (n = 18)

Range possible: 20 (*all responses very unhappy*) —
80 (*all responses very happy*)

<u>Sex</u>	<u>Total Pre-test mean</u>	<u>Total Post-test mean</u>
Boys	46.13 *, **	53.75 **
Girls	59.70 *	61.20

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Excerpts of either the literature discussion groups or the literature logs from the third graders are included. The excerpts are grouped according to the types of comments that emerged from both oral and written responses to literature.

Excerpts

Own related experiences. Students often made comments in writing or orally that showed how they related personally to the themes in the stories or to the actions of the characters. This personal response to literature is an important aspect of comprehension.

In *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), William's grandmother eventually buys him a doll when no one else will. This character caused one student to reflect upon her own experiences with her grandmother's gift giving: "I wanted a

Nintendo game and my grandmother ended up giving me a Nintendo shirt. I said, 'Grandma, I wanted a Nintendo *game*.' And then she ended up giving me Nintendo stickers."

In the discussion of *The Piggybook* (Browne, 1986), students noticed that the characters wore uniforms and since these students wore uniforms and went to a Catholic school, they assumed the characters did too:

Student: They go to a Catholic school.

Teacher: What makes you say that?

Student: 'Cuz they both got the same thing on.

Teacher: They do have uniforms on.

Student: I think they're twins.

Student: Just because they wear the same things doesn't mean that they go to a Catholic school.

The Piggybook (Browne, 1986) deals with the issue of the overworked mother, who in addition to having a job outside of the home, also does all of the housework. One day she leaves and the family has to fend for itself without her. Meanwhile, her family has literally turned into a family of pigs. One student related to the part of the story when the mother left. She wrote in her literature log: "My mom left and I thought she wasn't gone to come back for a long time." Another student felt as if she were overworked like the mother in the story and wrote: "It is like me. I all ways do that but I iron and I cook and I wash the clothes and make my bed and I wash my famiyes dish and clean up the house." Another student (who was a bit chubby) wrote that another student had called him a pig: "I didn't like the book because Edward said I was a pig." The book *Weird Parents* (Wood, 1990) is about a young boy who is very embarrassed by the behavior of his parents. In this discussion, students talked about how their parents embarrassed them too:

Student: When she was in the back of the bus and said "bye bye, honey cake" — I'd be embarrassed if my mom did that.

Student: My mom calls me her "honey" or "dear."

Student: My mom calls me "sweetheart."

Student: My mom calls me "chicken legs," "pencil legs," "turtle legs."

Student: Every morning my mother says, "Give me some sugar."

Illustrations. Some students noticed various aspects of the illustrations that gave the picture books added meaning. Characters became more real or the pictures added to the plot or the theme of the story. In the discussion of *The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body* (Cole, 1987), the clothes of zany Ms. Frizzle sent students back to the books to pore over the illustrations:

Student: Oh, look at her dress! It's got hands and ears and eyeballs.

Student: And look at the funny shoes!

In the discussion of *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987), students talked about whether the main character was a girl or a boy:

Student: This looks like a boy.

Teacher: Is it a boy or a girl?

Student: A boy.

Student: A girl.

Teacher: Is there a place in the story that tells you?

Student: You can look at her face when she puts her knees down, watch. Right here, see? It looks like a girl.

Teacher: It's kind of hard to tell.

Student: Boys don't wear pink coats.

Student: Paul and I do.

In the discussion of *The Piggybook* (Browne, 1986) students noticed all the different pig images throughout the book. They also noticed the color changes:

Teacher: Do you notice anything about how these illustrations are different from these?

Student: They're different colors.

Teacher: What do you mean by that?

Student: That is yellowish and there it's white.

Teacher: Okay, so this is darker and this is brighter?

Student: His chin looks like a pig.

Student: His face looks awful fat.

Student: And he's too big.

Student: It looks like he's getting ready to bust out of his clothes because he looks like a pig.

Student: Right here it looks like the mom don't got no eyes.

Teacher: You're right. The mom doesn't have any facial features, does she? She doesn't have any eyes.

Student: How come she looks younger in the end of the book than the beginning?

One student wrote about *The Terrible Thing That Happened At Our House* (Blaine, 1975), noticing the shoes in the illustrations: "I noticed they all got big shoes." Students also noticed that the characters' faces weren't shown in this book.

Student: How come they're not showing the mother's or the father's face?

Student: At the back of the book it shows them all.

Teacher: Why do you think they did that? Why do you think they didn't show their faces?

Student: Because they're too busy?

Student: Maybe the mom refused.

One student noticed the details in the illustrations of *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972): "I like the part when he played basketball because his belly was showing."

Higher level thinking. Students focused more on their own feelings and emotions about the book, rather than just recalling the details. They also discussed the genre of the story and the validity or believability of the story.

During the reading of *The Magic School Bus Inside The Human Body* (Cole, 1989), students questioned the validity of a school bus shrinking in size:

Student: A school bus can't go in nobody's body. It's too big.

Student: Unless it was a little school bus, a micro-machine.

Teacher: Then if you put it in your mouth, you might choke, wouldn't you?

In *The Mitten* (Brett, 1989), many different animals get inside of a mitten and students questioned the feasibility of this:

Student: I felt kinda funny — because how could all the animals fit in the mitten?

Student: I felt weird because that many animals can't fit in a mitten like that.

Teacher: So even though it was just a make-believe story you didn't like that part of it?

Student: Even though it's make-believe, if animals really try and fit in a mitten like that, they'd bust it open.

Students called upon their own feelings after reading *The Picture Book of Martin Luther King* (Adler, 1989):

Student: I felt sad.

Teacher: Tell us about it.

Student: Because Dr. Martin Luther King got shot.

Student: I was sad and happy because he helped everybody, black people not to hurt the white people and he died.

Student: I felt sad when they was making the black people sit in the back of the buses and stuff.

Student: Black people should be treated fairly.

Student: I was happy because he worked with some black people and sad because he died.

Student: I was mad because there was a lot of violence.

Student: A lot of people weren't treating him fairly. They didn't let him use the restroom.

Student: I felt bad that he died. He was a brave man.

Student: I noticed that if he was never born we wouldn't be here like this. We would be in slavery.

One student wrote in her literature log about *The Picture Book of Martin Luther King Junior* (Adler, 1989): "Sad. Sad. Sad. He work hard to lead us from killing are self." One student wrote about another biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. — *I Have a Dream* (Davidson, 1986): "I think I like this book because he was a man of freedom and justice."

With *The Wednesday Surprise* (Bunting, 1989), students thought about the theme of the book. In this book a young girl teaches her grandmother how to read.

Student: I noticed about this book that it was somebody that cared for people. They cared for each other.

Teacher: They did care for each other because they had a birthday party for each other.

Student: And she helped her grandmother.

Student: It made me happy 'cuz the old lady didn't know how to read and now she does.

Student: I wrote that I really loved the story. I'm glad she can read now. I'm so happy!

Student: I wrote I felt good when her grandma visited her. 'Cuz it was nice to have her come over every week.

Student: I wrote "I think it was a lovely book because she was teaching her grandmother how to read."

Student: I like it because they read all the time.

The genre of the story was often debated, as with *The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth* (Cole, 1987).

Teacher: What kind of story is this?

Student: Non-fiction.

Teacher: It's fiction or non-fiction?

Student: It's both. It tells some true things, but her dresses are really ugly.

Teacher: Why is it not true?

Student: Because how can a bus go right through a volcano?

Student: This is the fiction part — they'd be burnt by now.

The students also discussed genre when talking about *Gregory the Terrible Eater* (Sharmat, 1980). Gregory is a goat who eats all sorts of unhealthy food in this book, including a car.

Student: How could he eat a car?

Student: He couldn't eat the tires made of rubber. He would choke.

Student: The goat couldn't hold a glass of orange juice.

Teacher: *What else can a goat not do?*

Student: *Can't cook. Can't talk.*

Teacher: *So what kind of a book would you call this?*

Student: *Fantasy, fiction.*

One student even wrote a song about a character after reading about his sulking manner in *Spinky Sulks* (Steig, 1988): "Spinky sulks, sulks a lot, and I don't blame him either. He likes to sulk and I do too!"

Sense of author. A sense of author was evident in several discussions and actions of the children. They talked about how an author could be an authority on science subjects, as in *The Magic School Bus* series. While discussing *The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body* (Cole, 1989), one student started a discussion of how the author had the authority to write about the subject:

Student: *But I wonder if they know anything about people's bodies?*

Student: *Who's that?*

Student: *The people who made this book.*

The teacher then went on to direct the students to the beginning of the book where the author and illustrator thank a doctor for his help in preparing the book. When the teacher suggested that students could write their own Amelia Bedelia stories, two students took her literally and copied the book verbatim. They proudly showed it to her at their next session and said that they had written the book!

Predictions. Students made predictions about what the story would be about both in their written and oral comments. They hypothesized and risked their own ideas of what would happen in the stories. In discussing *The Mitten* (Brett,

1989), students noticed how the illustrations gave clues as to what animal would come next:

Student: In those mittens, each one knew what was gonna happen next on the next page.

Teacher: It's a preview, isn't it? Like when you go to the movies and they show you a preview of coming attractions, the little mitten over on the side is a preview. It shows you what'll happen on the next page.

In the discussion of *The Wednesday Surprise* (Bunting, 1989), students talked about what they thought the surprise would be when they read the book:

Student: I thought the surprise was going to be for the girl — her birthday.

Student: I thought that the little girl would learn to read.

(The book was actually about the way a young girl taught her grandmother to read.)

Book construction. Students thought about how the books were made, what the medals and stickers on the covers stood for, and so on. They truly examined the books. During the discussion of *The Jolly Postman* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1986), which includes actual envelopes and letters, one student questioned how the book was made:

Student: It had all kinds of letters to other people and they don't even write back and how do they write those typed words?

Student: The author must've did it.

Teacher: When they made this book, they put these envelopes in instead of pages, right? And then they made the things they wanted you to read and this is like a typed letter, isn't it? It's a copy of a typed letter.

So there's a copy in everybody's book. But it looks just exactly like a real letter, doesn't it?

Students also found out and talked about dedication pages, title pages, and the information about the author on the back flap of the book. They also noticed lists of books that the author had written included on the back or the front of some books. They noticed Reading Rainbow stickers and Caldecott Medals and discussed with their teacher what these meant.

They noticed that *The Picture Book of Martin Luther King Junior* (Adler, 1989) was a picture book, while another book about Martin Luther King — *I Have a Dream* (Davidson, 1986) — contained more text and fewer pictures. They noticed that the picture book had watercolor pictures while the other book had black and white photographs, prompting one student to say that some of the watercolor pictures "weren't true" like the photographs.

Language. Students noticed nuances of language in the books, they questioned vocabulary, and noticed abbreviations. During the rereading of *Weird Parents* (Wood, 1990) one student noticed the R copyright sign next to the word *parcheesi*.

Teacher: What do you suppose that R means there?

Student: Nobody else can use the word. You gotta ask the company.

During the discussion of *Teach Us, Amelia Bedelia* (Parish, 1977), one student modeled the type of homonyms they had been reading about:

Student: The kids were driving her nuts.

Teacher: Were they?

Student: No, they can't drive.

Teacher: That's a good one. That's something Amelia Bedelia would say!

When discussing the homonyms in *A Chocolate Moose for Dinner* (Gwynne, 1976), one student related his own experience with language confusion:

Student: My brother, he said go get the flour for Mom and I accidentally went outside and picked some flowers. I got mixed up!

Another student incorrectly predicted the meaning of a homonym:

Teacher: What's an undertow?

Student: That means when you take a bath you have to wash under your toes.

During the reading of *The Jolly Postman* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1986), many opportunities to discuss abbreviations came up:

Teacher: Does anyone know what H.R.H. Cinderella stands for?

Student: Home sweet home?

Student: Home rich home?

Teacher: Her Royal Highness.

Student: I know what B.B. Wolf is — Big Bad Wolf.

Some terms in *The Picture Book of Martin Luther King Junior* (Adler, 1989) brought in students' predictions:

Teacher: What does bias mean?

Student: It means when people go by you.

One student noticed the rhyming words in *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1988): "They had rhyming words like *fox* and *locks*, *rough* and *tough*." They also noticed the unique language that Tacky used.

Student: Tacky greeted him with a hearty slap on the back and loud, what's happenin', boy?

Teacher: Why is that funny?

Student: Because it's like talking slang like some people do on the streets.

Another student commented that he liked the names of the penguins: *Goodly*, *Lovely*, *Angel*, *Neatly*, and *Perfect*. The same student wanted to reread the refrain of the robbers: "We'll march with a switch and we'll sell 'em for a dollar and get rich, rich, rich."

During the discussion and rereading of *The Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987), one student noticed that the owl's cry of *Whooooooooo* on one line had seven o's and the *Whooooooooo* on the next line had eight o's.

Student: 'Cuz if he wasted all his breath on the first one, then he still waste his breath on the second one 'cuz he can't have more energy than he had the first time.

Teacher: So you think they should have more o's the first time than the second time?

Student: No, I'm talking about he should have the same o's 'cuz if he would've lost breath in the second o's and he did it again, then he should've lost breath at the same time.

The same student noted that he liked the way the story began.

Student: It was like a true story, like you know, on the "Wonder Years" when he'd be talking in his mind, that's what it was like to me.

Teacher: Because you thought the character was talking in his mind?

Student: Yes, talking to himself.

This same student had written in his literature log: "I liked the begening because what they said."

Story comparisons. Some books had similar themes or characters, prompting students to make connections between them. One student noted the similarities between book characters in the books *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1988) and *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King Junior* (Adler, 1989):

Student: I think Tacky and Dr. Martin Luther King was the same.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because Tacky saved his friends' lives and Dr. Martin Luther King he died, it was peace on earth.

Teacher: Okay, so you're saying Dr. Martin Luther King also helped people, didn't he? That's a really good observation.

When discussing *The Terrible Thing That Happened At Our House* (Blaine, 1975), students made connections with other books:

Student: I thought that she was going to get in trouble a lot like the guy who got gum in his hair.

Teacher: What story was that in?

Student: The Terrible, No Good, Very Bad, Horrible Day.

Teacher: You mean Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day?

Another student noted that the mother in this story dressed a lot like Ms. Frizzle in *The Magic School Bus* series.

Importance of teacher modeling

A teacher can play an important role in the modeling of appropriate and diverse response to literature. For instance, during a discussion of *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), in which William desperately wants a doll, the teacher offered this related comment during the literature discussion group:

The very first toy that my son got when he was little was a doll. That was the very first thing I bought him — a doll, a real soft one that had yarn hair. It didn't have very much hair, come to think of it. It was kind of made out of terrycloth and when he was really little he could suck on it like babies do on toys. And you could put it into the washing machine and get it clean again after he got it all yucky and dirty. But he loved that doll. He still has it.

The teacher also talked about language, especially when referring to *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987):

There's some really nice language in this book. I liked some of the words that they used — some are very descriptive. They really tell us about the story and about the night. They kind of make me feel maybe how the people might have felt out there looking for an owl and waiting for it.

Tacky is an individual in the truest sense of the word in the book *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1988). When discussing *Tacky the Penguin*, the teacher talked about how she sometimes felt like Tacky:

Teacher: I've felt like Tacky lots of times.

Student: How?

Teacher: When everybody else that I was around wanted to do things a certain way and I didn't feel like doing it that way. So I really identified with this book because I have felt like Tacky lots of times in my life. For instance, one of the things I do here at school that's different from the other teachers is that I don't like to eat lunch in the teachers' lounge. But I usually bring food that you have to heat up in the microwave and so like today when I have recess duty I'm in the lunchroom with you guys and then I go into the teachers' lounge and heat up my food and then I come in here and eat. And I think all the other teachers think I'm kind of strange sometimes because all the other teachers eat together in the teachers' lounge. But I don't like to do that so I come in the room by myself and eat. So that's one of the many things that I do that makes me feel like Tacky a lot of times.

Student: One thing you do is sell tickets.

Student: And you take us to McDonald's.

Important elements to encourage response

It is important to consider the following in fostering and eliciting response to literature. They are especially true of working with at risk children who may not have the literacy support at home that other children enjoy.

Children need to have their own copies of the books so that they feel they have some ownership of the process. They also need to see the illustrations up close and reread sections of the book. They develop more of an interest in books if they know what it is like to read and hold one of their own. Paperback copies of books are affordable, especially if the book clubs are used.

Children should feel free to discuss the book and voice their own opinion. There is no one correct response to a book. Children need to feel comfortable enough to say what they really think about a book. This group sharing is an important aspect of becoming a "warm, literate family" (Leitstein, 1991, p. 14).

Students need time to respond to literature. Students can't be expected to just automatically think of something to say about a book. They need time to reread or reexamine the book, peruse the illustrations, write in literature logs and think about the story. They also need time to talk to each other about their ideas and observations.

Quality literature is a prerequisite for response to literature. Students can't be expected to discuss plotless or trite stories. To encourage a love of reading and the diversity of response to literature, the best quality books should be used.

Some guidelines for responding to literature may be necessary, especially with children who are used to a more structured reading program. The three prompts mentioned earlier are very helpful for eliciting a variety of responses from children.

Teacher modeling of the love of literature and the diversity of responses possible is also important. Teachers must also read, discuss, and write about books if they expect students to do the same. The teacher's enthusiasm about books and reading in general is an important part of developing life-long readers.

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